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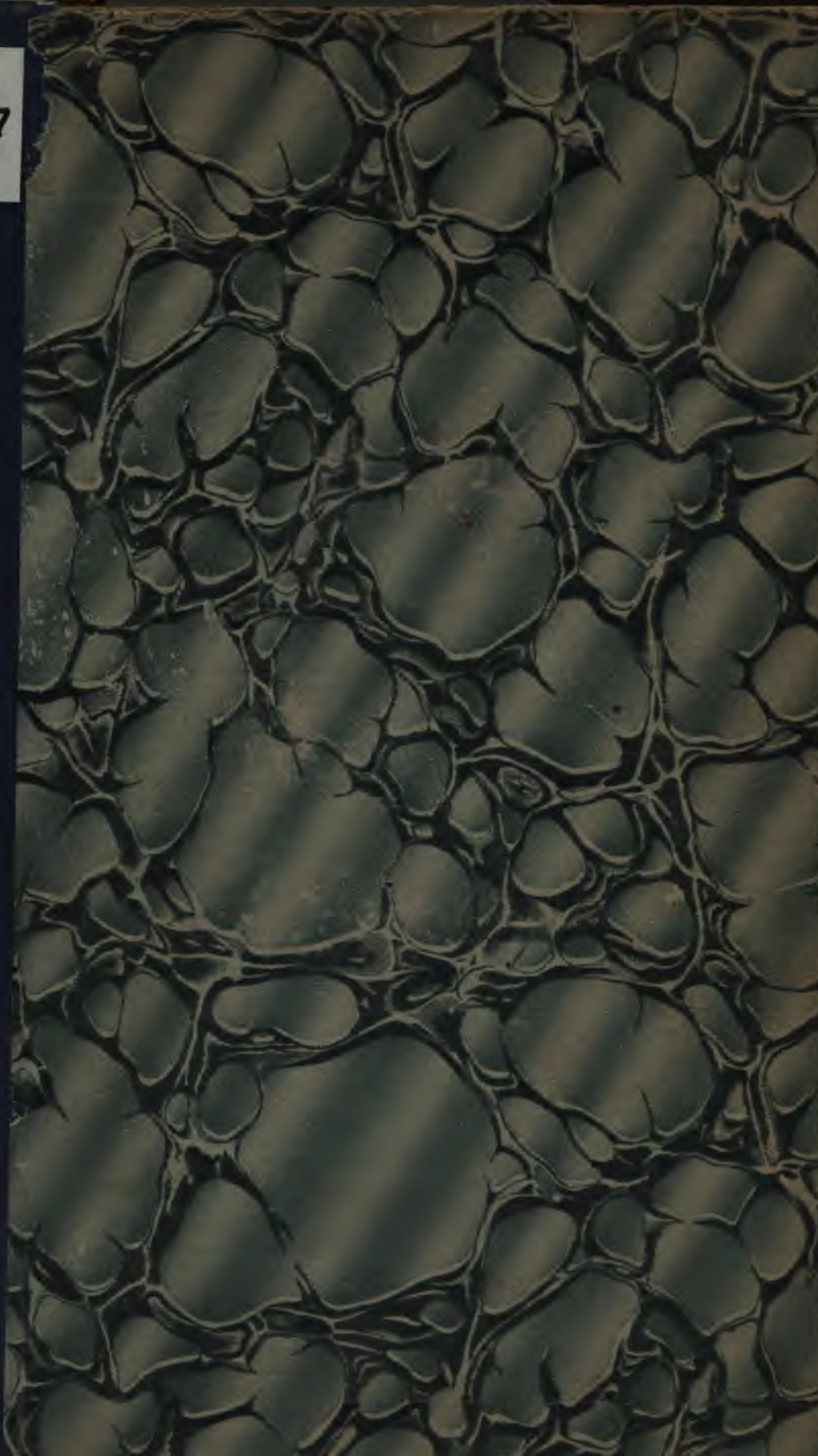
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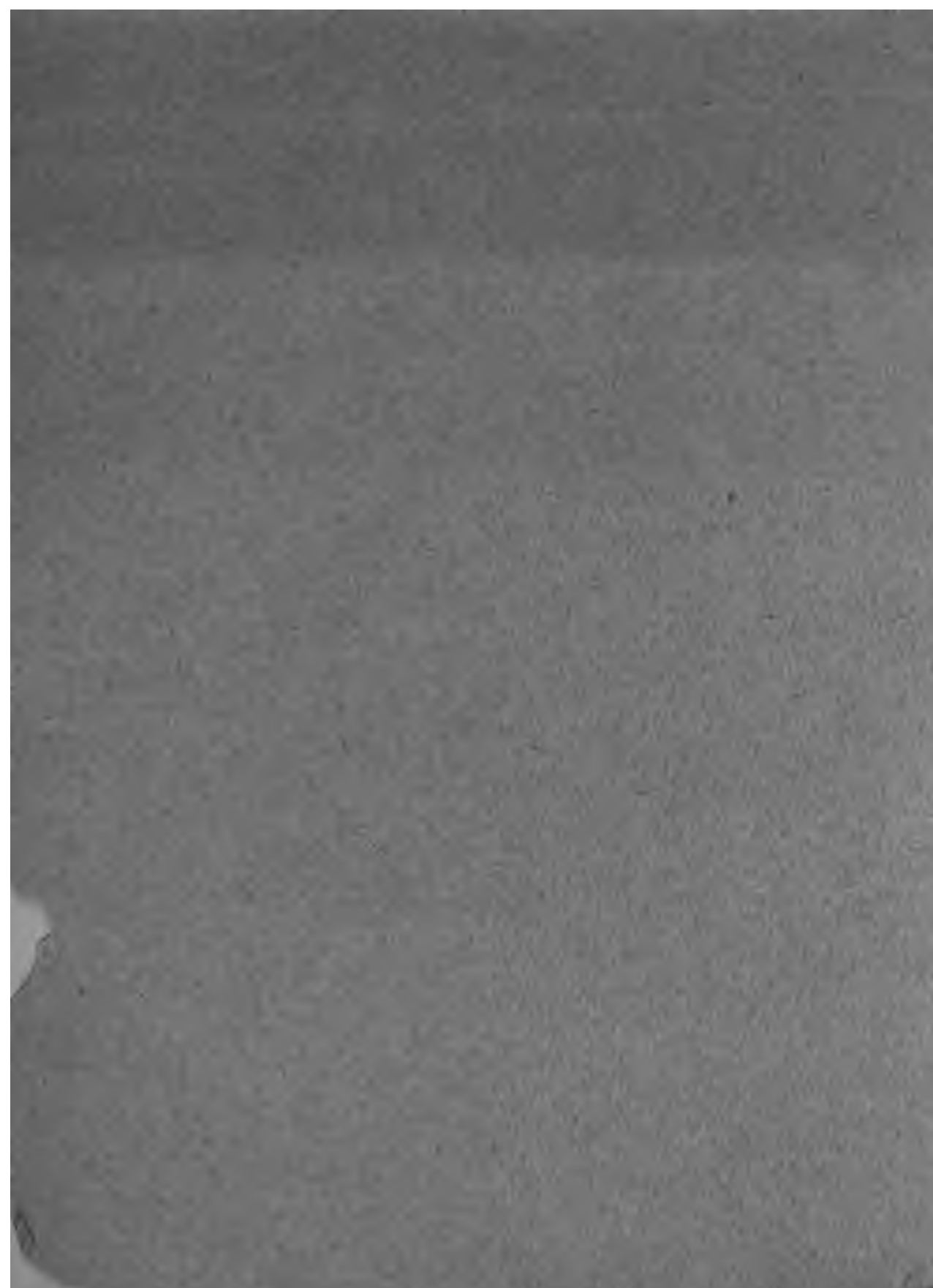
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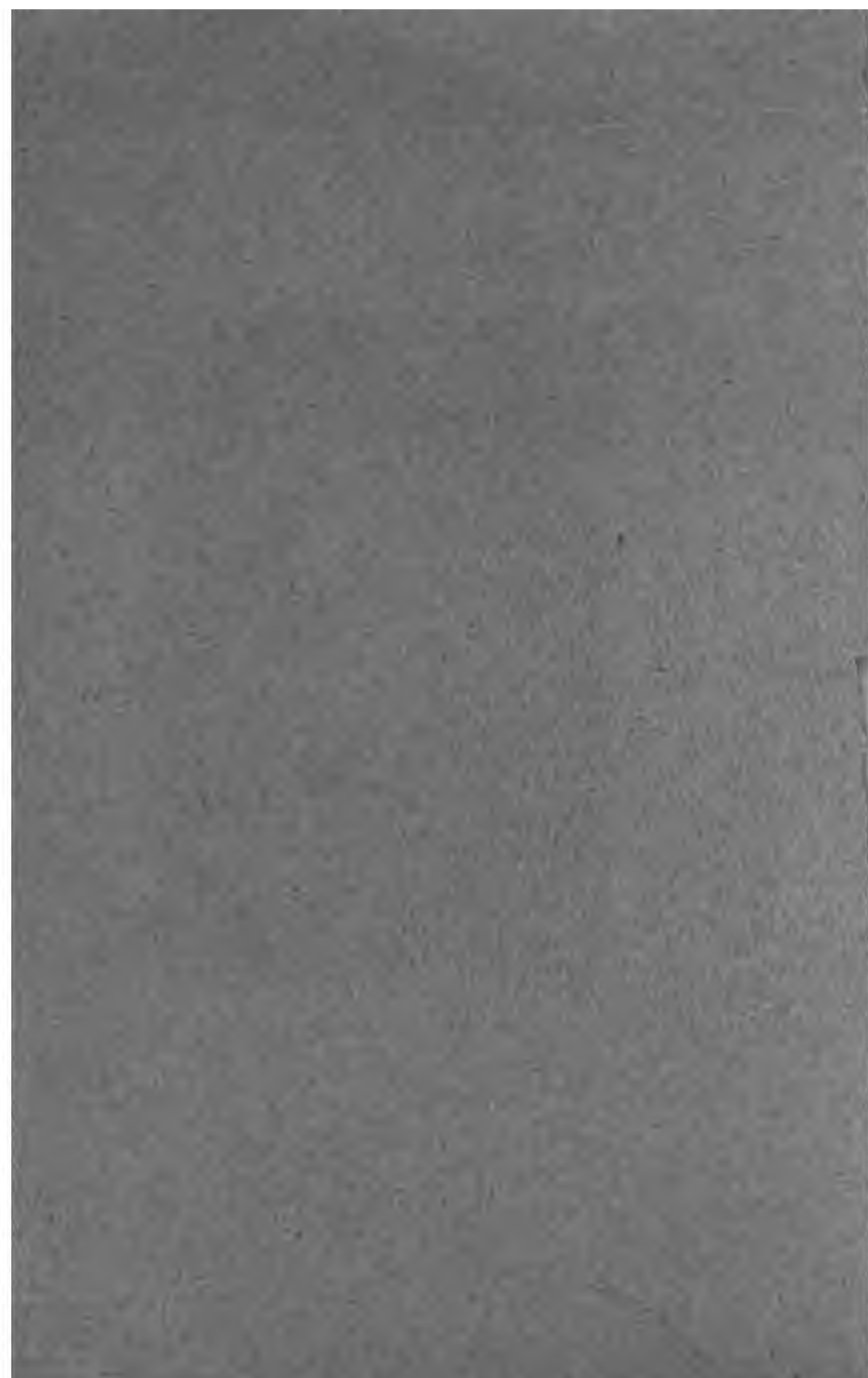




SIDNEY LANIER  
THE POET OF SUNRISE









**SIDNEY LANIER—THE POET OF SUNRISE**

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# SIDNEY LANIER

# THE POET OF SUNRISE

BY

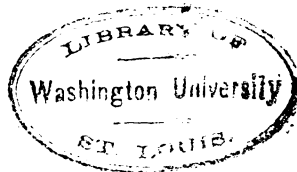
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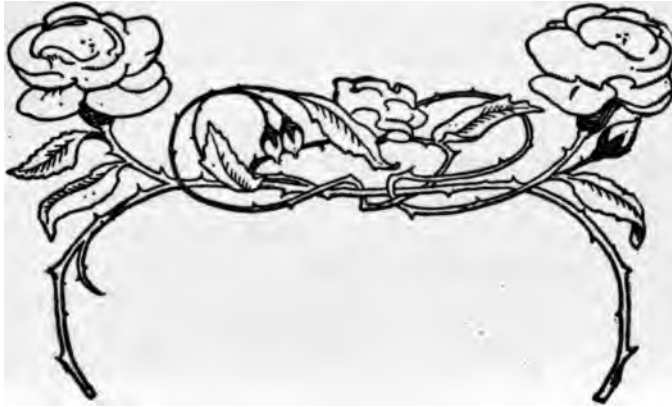
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## SIDNEY LANIER: THE POET OF SUNRISE

**I**N order that a poet's portrayal of an object in nature may be seen and felt it is best for him not to give a complete description; as a descriptive poet cannot expect us to accept all the mass of details that his mood sets before us. We have our own ideals, and prefer to form our own estimates, and interpret for ourselves. The best effects, therefore, are attained by giving side-glimpses of the object — visualized glimpses, that appeal to the pictorial imagination. Of this visualization there are two processes: in one the picture is complete in itself and sometimes reveals ideal beauty; in the other — which may be called the 'kindling' process — we have not a complete picture, but merely a hint or sign, by which we may, through any of our sense perceptions, construct the whole picture. If space but permitted many passages could be quoted herein that would readily illustrate how Tennyson has by visualization excelled Wordsworth and Longfellow in portraying sunrise. By the 'kindling hint' process in the opening of 'The Return of the Druses,' Browning has one line: —

'The moon is carried off in purple fire,'



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which sums up more than ordinary descriptive poets give us in entire stanzas.

Those that have made a study of the poetry of England in regard to the treatment of sunset and sunrise maintain that there are a greater number of poets that have written on sunset. I have not attempted to make an extensive examination of this phase of the treatment of nature by American poets; but in turning through Griswold's 'Poets and Poetry of America' I find ten poems on evening, sunset, and twilight; while only five on morning, sunrise, and dawn. Glancing, too, through a small number of works by Southern writers which are at hand I find fifteen poems pertaining to sunset, and only five pertaining to sunrise. If by further investigation we could establish the same fact with regard to American poets that we maintain regarding the poets of England we should find that in this respect Sidney Lanier does not agree with the majority of our writers. He has written three poems on sunrise: 'Sunrise,' 'A Sunrise Song,' and 'Between Dawn and Sunrise'; while, on the other hand, but two pertaining to sunset: 'Evening Song' and 'Marsh Song—at Sunset.' In addition to these poems he refers to sunrise, morning, or dawn, in twenty-four others; and to sunset, evening, or twilight, in only four. Moreover, some of his best poems, 'Corn' and 'A Florida Sunday,' were evidently composed in the morning hours; and in 'Clover' he says:

'Tis a perfect hour.  
From founts of dawn the fluent autumn day  
Has rippled as a brook right pleasantly  
Half-way to noon.'

Lanier is pre-eminently the poet of sunrise. When he delineates the changes and varied colors of the morning sky we find in his word-painting a richness, glow, and splendor that is not surpassed by the most celebrated pen-pictures given us by Browning in his delineations of sunrise, or by Shelley in his exquisite pictures of sunset. Although in much of Lanier's poetry there is evidence of a sense of strain and effort not often found in the lines of great masters like Tennyson, it must be admitted that when Lanier comes out before daylight, under the open sky, and wanders along 'the dew-plashed road,' no strain nor effort is manifest in his portrayal of external nature; he becomes a part of nature; it is not external to him. What he says, he *feels*. Lowell, in 'Under the Willows,' says that his soul 'danced in the

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leaves.' Lanier's soul would have danced *with* them in the morning hours, under similiar circumstances.

No painter could give us a picture of sunrise so complete, that appeals to our feelings so effectively, as Lanier gives in the opening lines of 'Corn,' where the trembling woods 'melt in green,' and the 'dawn-stars melt in blue.' The kindling hints in these lines appeal not only to our senses of sight and smell, by soft tints and shades of color, and faint waftings of odor, but also appeal to our sense of hearing, giving, in side-glances, the most delicate sounds, — sounds that ears not attuned to the 'music of nature' seldom hear save through the intervention and interpretation of musicians. If we had nothing but this poem its picture of sunrise would be sufficient to convince us that its author was a musician.

Many of Lanier's references to sunrise are also kindling hints that appeal to the ear: in 'Clover' we seem to hear 'nimble noises that with sunrise ran'; in 'The Waving of the Corn,' 'sounds that mix each morn with the waving of the corn'; in 'June Dreams in January,' a 'visible Sigh out of the mournful East' (impressionistic); and in 'The Mocking Bird,' it was morning when the bird 'summ'd the woods in song.'

But the most excellent hint that appeals to the ear is the one in 'Sunrise,' where the 'too-tenuous tissues of space and of night' are 'oversated with beauty and silence.' He does not tell us when or how this silence is broken, but leaves the interpretation to us; we feel a noise is made, but not a noise that can be described, not even one of his 'little noises' or 'nimble noises'; it is a noise that our imaginations realize — that we hear with our inner ear. In contemplating this picture of dawn we see beyond the picture, and, by emotional inference, see the portrayer himself; we realize how one could feel with an ear like his — an ear capable of catching such delicate sounds, and thus have, at first hand, experiences of 'Revelatory Truth.'

In the 'Sunrise' there are other kindling hints which, by means of motion, appeal to us through our sense-perceptions. At the same time that the indescribable sound is made, there is also a motion:

'But no: it is made: list! somewhere, mystery, where?

In the leaves? in the air?

In my heart? Is a motion made:

'Tis a motion of dawn, like a flicker of shade on shade.'

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There are other references to sunrise where the hints are made by means of motion: in 'Symphony' the mountain fawns 'tremble if the day but dawn'; in 'Jacquerie' a figure is used where blood is represented leaping 'As a hart upon the river-banks at morn'; and in the passages quoted above from 'Clover' and 'The Waving of the Corn,' motion, in connection with sound, helps to complete the picture.

The best pictures that are set forth through kindling hints by means of color are found in 'My Springs'; here heaven and earth are 'shot through with lights of stars and dawns'; and in 'A Florida Sunday,' in connection with sound and motion, we are made to see the pea-green paroquets, to hear their calls, and to see their 'quick flights from green to green'; in 'Corn,' to which reference has already been made, the woods 'melt in green as dawn-stars melt in blue.'

Bryant, the most popular nature-poet of America, is, in his treatment of sunset and sunrise, the antithesis of Lanier. In reading a few of his poems that pertain to sunset, — as 'A Walk at Sunset,' 'The Evening Wind,' 'An Evening Reverie,' and 'May Evening,' — we are convinced that the morning hour was not a favorite theme with him.

'Give me one hour to hymn the setting sun'

is his appeal to his poetic muse. In his estimation the sun's 'setting smiles' were 'loveliest.' Nature had most charms for him at the hour when

'.....the weary bee....  
Rests in his waxen room,'

and

'Every hovering insect to his place  
Beneath the leaves hath flown.'

Whitman, another American poet who loved nature, seldom referred to sunrise in his poetry. Like Bryant, he loved better the evening hours. In 'Twilight' he speaks of

'The soft voluptuous opiate shades'

that appeared when the sun had 'just gone,' and when the 'eager light' had been 'dispelled'; and in 'A Prairie Sunset' he tells us of the

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‘Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows to the last.’

But Whitman’s sunset sky, beautiful and sublime as it is, is surpassed by the calm solemnity of his night sky; in his ‘Song of Myself’ he says:

‘I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,  
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.  
Press close bare-bosom’d night — press close magnetic nourishing night!’

Among American poets Bryant is the poet of the evening sky; Whitman of the night sky. But Lanier is the poet of the morning sky. Further, he is pre-eminently the poet of the day sky. He manifests more interest in the sky as seen by day than in that seen by night. In this respect he is not only the antithesis of Whitman, but of Keats. Keats has been called the ‘moon poet’ of England; Lanier could well be called the ‘sun poet’ of America.

Although Lanier stands pre-eminently above all American writers as poet of the day sky and of sunrise there are several among our verse-writers of lesser fame that deserve commendation. Paul Hamilton Hayne in ‘Cloud Fancies,’ ‘The May Sky,’ and ‘Cloud Pictures’; and Amelia B. Welby in her exquisite little poem, ‘The Rainbow,’ have portrayed the day sky in no mean way. Richard Watson Gilder in ‘New Day’ gives a pleasing picture of the morning sky:

‘Slowly, within the East, there grew a light  
Which half was star-light, and half seemed to be  
The herald of a greater. The pale white  
Turned slowly to pale rose, and up the height  
Of heaven slowly climbed. The gray sea grew  
Rose-colored like the sky.’

But contrast this with Lanier’s picture in ‘Sunrise’:

‘And lo, in the East! Will the East unveil?  
The East is unveiled, the East hath confessed  
A flush: ’tis dead; ’tis alive; ’tis dead, ere the West  
Was aware of it: nay, ’tis abiding, ’tis unwithdrawn:  
Have a care, sweet Heaven! ’Tis Dawn.’

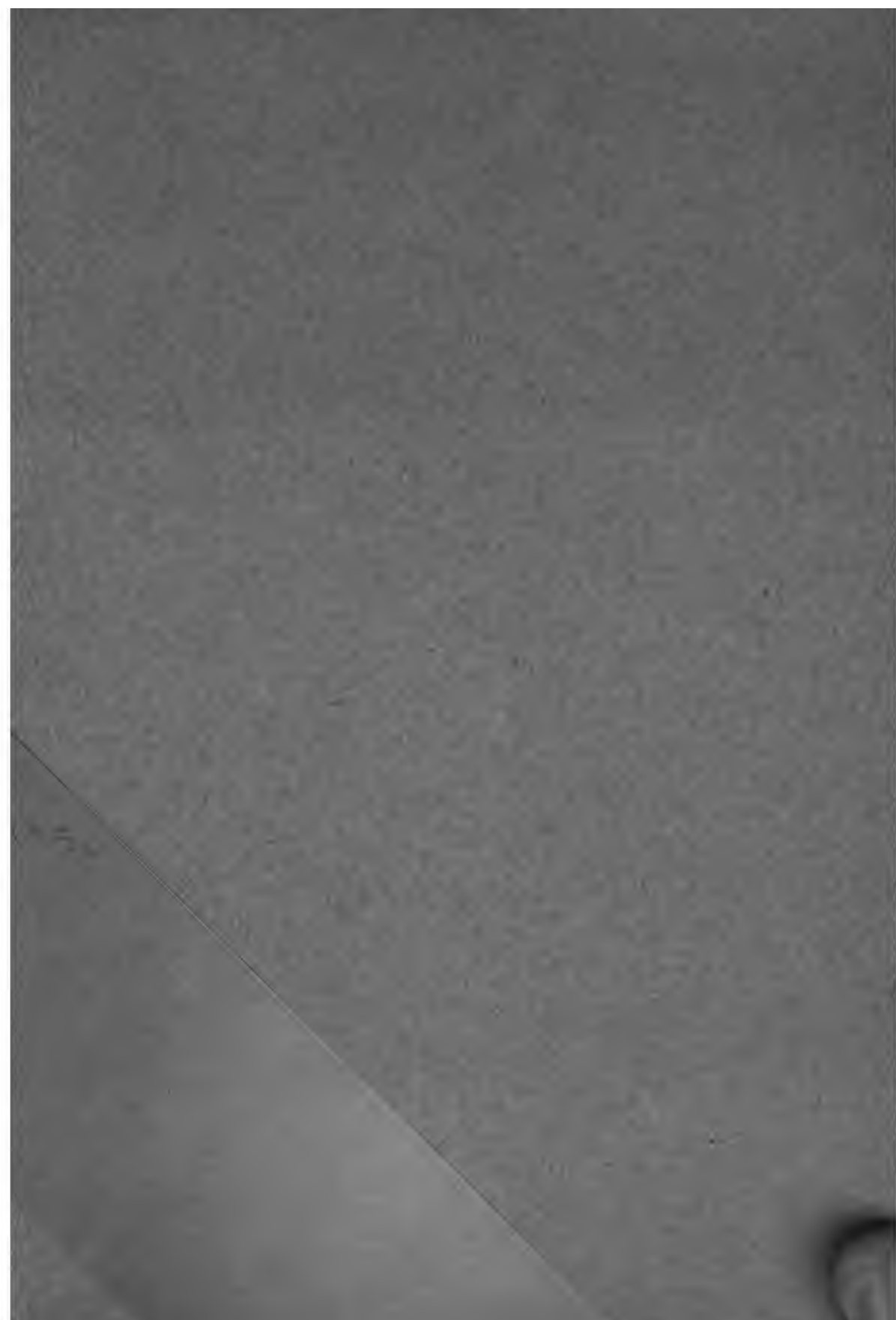
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In the former we have a description; the writer tells us that the colors are 'pale white,' 'pale rose,' 'gray,' and 'rose-colored.' In reading this poem we feel that Gilder is forcing his interpretations upon us. Lanier does not do this; he appeals indirectly to us; gives us hints, and leaves the interpretation to us. We are made to feel that the 'East is unveiled' — that it is dawn; we need not be told of the colors of his morning sky; they are there. Again, Gilder tells us three times, in these few lines, that the changes in color took place 'slowly.' Lanier does not interpret the change for us — does not tell us how the change took place; in a subtle way he makes us feel that there was a change in the color of the eastern sky, which happened 'ere the West was aware of it.' In his treatment of sunrise Gilder is interpretative; Lanier, revelatory. Lanier's touch is the touch of an artist.

Although he was not in every respect as great a poet as others that have been quoted in this paper, or even as great a nature-poet as some, it must be admitted that in his treatment of sunrise he has uniqueness, — a subtle quality not surpassed by other poets. Browning, for example, in his visualized presentations of sunrise, although beautiful and impressive, used them primarily as backgrounds upon which he delineated human character. After reading the opening stanza of 'The Return of the Druses' we forget the gorgeous coloring of the Oriental scene, and turn our attention unconsciously to the study of the characteristics of the Syrian people. In the first stanza of 'Pippa Passes' our sympathies are turned to the poor 'little silk-winding girl,' in whose welfare we become so interested that we lose sight of the beautiful Italian sunrise as the day

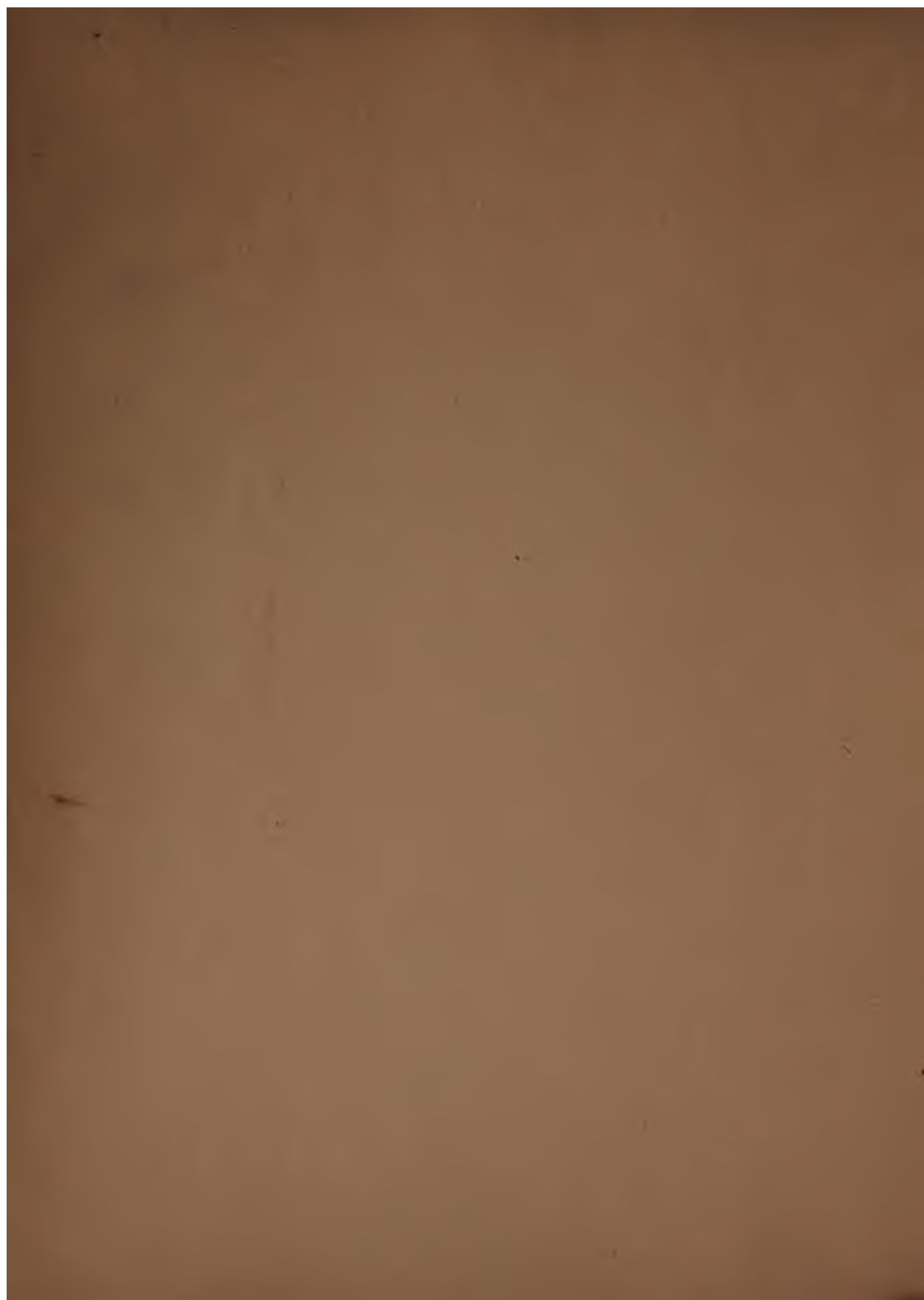
'Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim.'

In their treatment of sunrise Tennyson and other great poets, like Browning, have used it as a means to accomplish other purposes. Lanier portrayed sunrise for its own sake; in this respect he excelled them all.

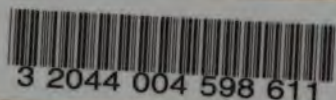












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